

Minutes
Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission
April 28, 2015 at 7:00 pm

Members present:

Ermete J. Raffaelli, Chairman
Michael E. Lauter, Secretary
Wayne Jonas Bealer, Assistant Secretary
William F. Cinfici

Staff present:

Andrew W. Miller, Planning Office
Deborah A.S. Hoag, Department of Public Works

Others present:

Aristides I. Otero, Stackhouse Bensinger Inc.
Douglas F. Smith, Alvernia University
Adam Mukerji, Reading Redevelopment Authority
Stephen F. DeLucas, Reading Eagle Company

Chairman Raffaelli called the April meeting to order, and asked for acceptance of the agenda. Mr. Miller suggested switching the order of the two presentations, based on the attendance. Mr. Lauter moved to accept the April 28th agenda, in the alternate sequence. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to accept the April agenda.

Subdivision and Land Development:

Arrival Court at Francis Hall (Alvernia University) – parking lot land development plan [0:00.53]

Mr. Otero presented a clearer representation of a concept first shared with the Commission at its March 24th meeting. It compared views of the existing condition at the rear of Francis Hall, the radial 79-space arrangement shown on the recorded 'South Campus Project' plans, and a simplified alternative preferred for the cost and grading advantages. It would still require the demolition of an existing maintenance garage and a former convent building currently used as storage, before restriping the existing areas of paving. Mr. Miller asked how they calculated their claimed reduction in impervious cover. Mr. Otero clarified that he based it on a shaded area of the plan, that area impacted by this specific project. He said the new layout will provide for the accessibility requirements. He mentioned a previous meeting with the Zoning Administrator, and understood his intent to issue a permit. Mr. Miller asked that notes referencing it, and the previously-recorded plans be added to a final copy of the current plan. Questioned on the orientation and perspectives of its comparative views, he suggested adding north arrows as well. Asked for an explanation of the plan's status, in relation to the erosion and sedimentation control permitting of the whole, Mr. Otero said it and some improvements on Adams Street would be covered at an upcoming meeting with the Berks County Conservation District and that, in any case, it was covered under an active National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit. Regarding the drainage patterns, he said some additional yard drains may be indicated, but flows would continue toward the basins previously designed and adequately sized. Ms. Hoag requested that they forward a copy of the original stormwater report. Mr. Miller said that, other than those concerns already addressed, he wanted to verify that the designated emergency access route through the campus (a load-bearing pedestrian way) wouldn't be impacted. Mr. Otero said the modifications wouldn't create any dead ends. Mr. Smith said the Fire Department had actually driven the route as a part of its inspection of a previous stage of the South Campus Project. He clarified that the buildings being razed include a garage and a former president's house, a two-bedroom 'ranch-type' structure. Asked about the difference in parking-space count, Mr. Otero said the current plan yields an additional nine spaces. Mr. Miller recommend a waiver of the full plan review process, due to the ambiguity in counting 'new' spaces, and the comprehensive-scope of the existing record plan. He wanted to encourage that scope of planning, and resist requiring formal revision plans for relatively minor modifications. He acknowledged Stackhouse Bensinger's continuing role in the campus planning and base mapping, and suggested a final drawing that included the requested notes and a copy of the stormwater report for the Public Works Department.

Mr. Bealer moved to waive the full land development and recording procedures, on the provision of an addendum plan for the Planning Office's record and a stormwater report for the Public Works Department. Mr. Cinfici seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to waive further review and recording.

Resolution #17-2015

Other business:

Residential, Commercial, Industrial Redevelopment Program (Reading Redevelopment Authority) [0:15.35]

Mr. Mukerji, seeking additional flexibility in the Redevelopment Authority's activities, identified a mechanism, allowed by Pennsylvania's Urban Redevelopment Law of 1945, whereby authorities may form a 'subsidiary not-for-profit', issue it tax-exempt bonds, and effectively fund its own projects. He said it allows them the latitude to work through other not-for-profits and private entities under the Authority's oversight. He said it gives the Authority more control, in conjunction with the Planning Commission. Asked if the new entity was anything like the County Redevelopment Authority's 'Nonprofit Development Corporation', established in October 2013, Mr. Mukerji characterized it as 'the same thing'. Asked about the continuing role of the Planning Commission, Mr. Mukerji called it 'a partner in everything they do', and assured that everything it proposes would be consistent with the City's Comprehensive Plan. Mr. Miller asked if that role involved anything other than subdivision and land development reviews. Mr. Mukerji said it could if the Commission desired, and that he could present what they do. He called it 'another tool in the tool box', recalling many projects they'd have preferred to do directly but 'gave away' because of the funding restrictions. He said the new arrangement would allow them to provide the financing and the oversight. He mentioned grants written and administered for Alvernia University's projects, and the Authority's involvement in the Book Bindery apartments at 148 North 4th Street. Asked how those situations or the experience with the 'Buttonwood Gateway' industrial park might be different, with the in-house not-for-profit, Mr. Mukerji recalled their arrangement with Our City-Reading Inc. He explained that the Authority cannot issue bonds to itself but, under the proposed scenario, it could 'downstream' those funds to its not-for-profit. Mr. Cinfici said that intent wasn't included in the narrative provided, and preferred that it be better explained. Mr. Mukerji said they simply copied the program that worked for the County Redevelopment Authority. He confirmed that the same (Authority) board of directors would run the not-for-profit. The Commission members considered the City Charter's bearing on the added roles. Mr. Mukerji averred the Authority's independent status as an exception to the Charter's restriction. Asked if there had been any recent changes to the Redevelopment Law prompting this proposal, Mr. Mukerji said not. Mr. Miller wondered how the establishment of a duplicate entity resolves what is otherwise forbidden. Asked if the arrangement was in practice elsewhere within the Commonwealth, Mr. Mukerji said yes, and added that the legal counselors to both the County and City authorities had vetted the program before its presentation. Mr. Miller questioned the usage of the term of blight 'prevention' as distinct from blight 'elimination' within the text of the summary. Mr. Mukerji considered it a legal question for the solicitors. Mr. Lauter wondered if it would result in the Authority taking on more projects, or creating partnerships with more entities. Mr. Mukerji hoped it would help the Authority attract more-competent developers, relative to the size of a given project. Mr. Cinfici questioned the types and terms of the bonds intended, and its implications vis-à-vis credit ratings. Mr. Mukerji said it wouldn't matter, as they were revenue bonds rather than general-obligation bonds associated with the City. Asked if the proposed not-for-profit had a name, Mr. Mukerji answered 'not yet'. Mr. Miller, alluding to language used in the summary, asked if any projects outside the City were foreseen. Mr. Mukerji said the Authority is limited to projects within the City limits, barring even City-owned parcels in other municipalities. Ms. Hoag asked about the expected size of projects handled through the not-for-profit. Mr. Mukerji expected it would be used for their smaller projects. Asked about the bond counsel advising the Authority, he mentioned having worked with several in the past. Mr. Miller asked if the summary's commitment to projects consistent with the zoning requirements included variances as may be granted by the appellate board. Mr. Mukerji preferred to address those situations on a project-specific basis, referring again to conformity with the Comprehensive Plan. Asked for a suggested action, Mr. Miller declined to make a recommendation, and asked what exactly the Authority needed to satisfy the Redevelopment Law's requirement. Mr. Mukerji said a resolution approving the Program. Asked if any other municipal approvals were required, Mr. Mukerji said not. Mr. Raffaelli felt the summary lacked the necessary specificity. Mr. Lauter noted that the summary refers to documentation requirements, including a project's consistency with municipal plans, and thought those considerations should be better explained. Asked if the Program had been or would be presented to City Council, Mr. Mukerji said not. Mr. Lauter said he was comfortable with the idea and aim of the Program, but preferred it be more-clearly described in the written summary. Mr. Miller asked if the financing arrangement was the only substantive change under the Program. Mr. Mukerji acknowledged that as the difference. Mr. Miller felt the summary should say so, and be clear in its language. He said it instead recites what the Authority already does. Mr. Cinfici also supported the idea, and asked for a better description. Mr. Lauter said he didn't read anything about forming another entity, and couldn't know what the Commission would be agreeing to, based on the summary. Mr. Miller likewise favored the flexibility and a reduction in 'middle men' generally, but, between supporting that concept and 'authorizing' the Program based on its written summary, wasn't sure how to advise the Commission, didn't understand its continuing role or why the Redevelopment Law required its permission. Mr. Mukerji wasn't sure himself, but noted the County Redevelopment Authority approved its program by the same process. He offered to have his legal counsel provide

additional information. Mr. Lauter asked only that the text better reflect what he'd since explained. Mr. Mukerji noted that the Planning Commission has 45 days to render its decision. Asked what would happen if they didn't respond, Mr. Mukerji said the Program would be 'automatically approved'. He concluded his presentation, intending to expand on the written narrative.

Mr. Lauter moved to table consideration, anticipating a revised Program summary the following month, while indicating the Commission's support of the concept. Mr. Cinfici seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to reconsider a revised summary of the Redevelopment Authority's 'Residential, Commercial, Industrial Redevelopment Program'.

Mr. Miller briefed the members on the status of a few recently-approved plans still awaiting recording.

review the draft March 24, 2015 meeting minutes [1:03.15]

Mr. Bealer suggested a punctuation change and then moved to accept the March meeting minutes. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to accept the March 24th meeting minutes, with the one edit.

Resolution #18-2015

The Commission discussed the latest activities of the Blighted Property Review Committee, including its April 16th certification hearing.

Mr. Lauter moved to adjourn the April meeting. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission adjourned the April 28th meeting. – 8:16p